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E2 CULTURE

miles davis

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The magic and

The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts offers the only showing in North America of this exhibition devoted to 'the Picasso of Jazz'

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

According to Miles Davis in his acrimonious autobiography, when the trumpeter was invited to a White House dinner in 1987, an older woman asked him what he'd done to merit being there. Davis shot back, "Well, I've changed music five or six times." Drum roll, please ...

Davis was hailed as "The Picasso of Jazz," a sobriquet that Nathalie Bondil, director of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, appropriated to explain the multimedia exhibition We Want Miles: Miles Davis vs. Jazz, opening on Friday. Like Picasso's, his career was marked by distinct stylistic periods: bebop, cool, hard-bop, orchestral jazz, modal music, jazz-rock, funk and techno-funk. Famously dubbed the Prince of Darkness, as artist and man, Davis created music worthy of the overused word hypnotic. Nearly 20 years after his death, he continues to put a spell on us.

We Want Miles, exclusive to Montreal in North America, is divided into eight themes, with different gallery spaces reflecting the periods of his career through over 350 items associated with Davis, many of them previously unseen by the general public – photos, films, album covers and artwork (including paintings by Miles), personal effects, instruments, assorted ephemera. And lots of music. The exhibition – assembled by Vincent Bessières, a former editor at Jazzman magazine of Paris, with input from the Montreal International Jazz Festival – was a roaring success during its run at Cité de la Musique in Paris last winter.

If Davis was inspired by some of the greatest 20th-century musicians, from Charlie Parker to Billie Holiday to James Brown, he took pains to be his own man. His music from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s remains evergreen, much of it visionary. So much so that when he faltered in the 1980s, the last full decade of his tumultuous life, he continued to fascinate.

Bessières has claimed that "over and above jazz and even music, Davis's appetite for renewal remains an example for artists in every other field. ... He continues to elude and provoke debate between those fascinated with his ability to transform himself and those who see him as a musical opportunist." (Actually, both camps are right.) Bessières says Davis renewed himself about every five years. "This is not a lot of time; five years can go by very quickly and each change involved enormous risk. Before embarking on this exhibition, I had definitely not gauged the speed at which Davis's art changed. Now I admire him all the more."

Charisma was his calling card. True, charisma was also the providence of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Charles Mingus, Chet Baker and Keith Jarrett. But no one was as enigmatic as Miles. His interviews were often outrageously arrogant, contentious, infuriating, yet just as often perceptive, generous, witty, wise. He was the purveyor of rope-a-dope before Muhammad Ali, the oblique put-on before Andy Warhol.

Above all, he was almost always controversial.

Early on, critics claimed he didn't have the technical chops of, say, Dizzy Gillespie – Miles was the first to admit it – but his cool style cast the longest shadow on trumpet players, and all jazz musicians, to follow; there's no escaping him. He had a tone that was purely his, whether open-horned clarion calls or muted-filled murmurs on his Harmon mute. His sound was sparse, lean, lyric, timeless; he suggested rather than emphasized.

Yet Kind of Blue, which remains the album that has turned on more people to jazz than any other, initially garnered a lukewarm response. As the most romantic piece of jazz music (soundtrack for countless seductions), and a revolutionary "modal" concept album analyzed endlessly by theorists, it became the perennial bestseller in jazz history.

Born in 1926, the son of a prosperous middle-class family – his father was a prominent dentist in East St. Louis – he seemed imbued with a sense of entitlement. (Free jazz pioneer Ornette Coleman, a rival for fame whom Davis dissed in 1969, claimed Davis was a black man who lived like a white.) He was always the fanciest dresser, on the cutting edge of style, whether in sharply cut Italian suits or extravagant psychedelic-funk finery (tight bell-bottoms and flowing scarves). He was the most photogenic of jazz artists – and he knew it, looking in the mirror one night before a gig early in his career, he said he felt so "clean" that he forgot to take his trumpet. In this respect, the exhibition's photos double as a history of fashion; his hairstyles went from slick conk to neat natural to full-blown Afro to permed curls.

He infuriated critics by often playing with his back turned to audiences, rarely acknowledging them, sometimes leaving the stage when his musicians took solos.

His pride of race was a precursor to Black Power, and he was hassled by police for enjoying the perks (luxury cars, glamorous women) normally reserved for white stars. (A collage of newspaper headlines after he was beaten by New York City cops, while smoking a cigarette outside a club between sets in 1959, is a chilling reminder.) Yet he welcomed whites he deemed worthy, catching flack from blacks in 1958 for hiring pianist Bill Evans. His association with Canadian-born arranger Gil Evans was one of the most fertile collaborations in jazz history.

Continued on Page E3

"Davis's appetite for renewal remains an example for artists in every other field."
Exhibition co-ordinator Vincent Bessières

A photo from the We Want Miles exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts titled "Miles Davis, Festival Newport à Paris, Palais des Sports, Paris, 15 novembre 1973."
CHRISTIAN ROSE MONTREAL MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

Miles to read

Miles: The Autobiography, with Quincy Troupe (1989). The wildest, most arrogant, exaggerated, scabrous, obscenity-laden and, yes, insightful jazz autobiography ever. Pure hubris.

Milestones, by Jack Chambers (1985). Canadian music historian offers the first major study, session-by-session; amazingly detailed, remarkably accessible, fascinating and fair.

Miles Davis: The Definitive Biography, by Ian Carr (1999). British critic-musician accents the musical process in a heroic effort.

So What: The Life of Miles Davis, by John Szwed (2004). The best bio by far, elegantly written, provocative, complete. (The author visits the museum June 30.)

We Want Miles: Miles Davis vs. Jazz, by Franck Bergerot, edited by Vincent Bessières (2010). The exhibition book, beautifully designed, with many never-before-published pictures. The text, including memoirs by key insiders, is a superbly clear introduction to a complex subject.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

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